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Editorial Notebook

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Hollywood: History by Default

The Blame Transcends Oliver Stone

John F. Kennedy's assassination was the most traumatic spectacle of the television age, and because many still doubt that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, it remains an open-ended trauma. But even that doubt cannot account for all the criticism of the movie "JFK," Oliver Stone's unpersuasive attempt to prove that Government conspirators arranged the assassination.

The criticism began while the movie was still being filmed. Political journalists have since tried to blow it off the screen. The critics even include former President Gerald R. Ford, a member of the Warren Commission.

This is more than a simple conflict between two versions of a historical event. The rancor over "JFK" arises from the realization that historical lies are nearly impossible to correct once movies and television have given them credibility.

The critics have two complaints: that the movie suppresses information well known to students of recent history, and that "JFK" is fiction so cunningly disguised that audiences will accept it as fact. The first speaks to simple misrepresentation. But the second describes a process — the fictionalization of fact — that took a quantum leap with television docudramas.

Mr. Stone does deserve a rhetorical thrashing for the film. His evidence for a Government conspiracy contains one factual misstatement after another. Perhaps the most notable misrepresentation is the movie's view of Jim Garrison, the New Orleans District Attorney in 1967 who dreamed up conspiracy charges against a retired businessman, Clay Shaw. Mr. Garrison was a malevolent force, not the Frank Capra good guy he's made out to be.

But Mr. Stone is just one of many who practice spurious history. Another is Alan Parker, whose film "Mississippi Burning," based on the Ku Klux Klan's murder of three civil rights workers, was as falsified as "JFK." In fact, the murders were solved thanks to a $30,000 bribe; in the film, a townswoman informs on her husband after an attack of conscience. In life, J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I. was hostile to the civil rights movement; the film makes F.B.I. agents its heroes.

Mr. Stone is the most skilled player of this game. His films "Born on the Fourth of July" (about Vietnam), "The Doors" (the early rock era), and now "JFK" treat subjects that have strong emotions and much documentary film attached to them. His movies resemble wax museums in the way they strive to replicate their characters physically. Charged images lend power to his version of the story; bias is easily masked as history.

Not long ago, a film maker who took this kind of latitude would have changed names or added some kind of disclaimer. Today that kind of truthfulness seems quaint. Film makers no longer feel obliged even to acknowledge what they are doing.

The children of the video age get their information more from images than from words. They tend to believe uncritically what they see. They'll swallow "JFK" whole. Society cannot police art for inaccuracies; film makers are free to take whatever liberties they wish. But society can denounce bogus history — and study honest history. That means reading, critically. Otherwise Hollywood becomes the culture's historian by default.

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